nature net

The **Nature***Kenya* Newsletter April 2001

REPORTING

FOREST EXCISIONS CRISIS

On February 14, Nature Kenya's Executive Committee was alerted to newspaper reports that some forests were slated for degazettement, and agreed to act on the issue. Two days later the *Kenya Gazette* published 14 notices of proposed excisions of Forest Reserves. (In a supplement to the *Gazette*, there was also a notice of excision of part of Mount Kenya forest near the Sirimon River. This area had been proposed for excision in 1998, objections had been made, and the final de-gazettement was announced on 16 February 2001.)

Nature Kenya is a founder member of the Kenya Forests Working Group, and our representatives attended the crisis meeting immediately called by KFWG. There a series of actions were agreed: gathering information, press conference to share the information with others, collecting petitions and letters of objections to each *Gazette* notice.

Information was collected from the ground, from publications (including the EANHS' *Important Bird Areas in Kenya*), from aerial surveys and satellite images. A small drafting team compiled the information and produced a press release and fact sheets.

Research showed that many of the areas proposed for excision had already been encroached upon, cleared and settled. These raise issues of legality and lost investment and environmental services. Other proposed excisions - especially in Western, South-Western and Eastern Mau, and in Hombe and Rogati on Mount Kenya - still support indigenous forest or plantations, and play crucial roles as water catchments and reservoirs of biodiversity.

Meanwhile, volunteers from Nature Kenya, Site Support Groups in the Important Bird Areas programme, and other organisations fanned out across the country collecting signatures on the KFWG petition. Thanks to the Sarit Centre in Nairobi for providing space for the Nature Kenya stand. Some 28,000 signatures were presented to the Minister for Environment on March 15.

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TALKS & VIDEOS

High Hopes, Low Tides
KIUNGA MARINE NATIONAL PARK

Monday 9 April '01, 5:30 p.m.
National Museums of Kenya, Nairobi, FORD HALL
Refreshments prior & Town drop off

This film is a story of challenges to achieve Marine Conservation in East Africa, using Kiunga Marine Reserve as an example.

We hope to have a resource person from World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) available to take questions about the long term management strategy being implemented by WWF and Kenya Wildlife Service.

The Extinction Precipice - stopping endangered birds dropping over the edge?

Talk by Ken Norris

He will talk about projects involving Jerdon's courser, the Seychelles magpie robin, and the St Helena plover.

Thursday 12 April '01, 2:30 p.m. National Museums of Kenya, Nairobi, Natural Sciences Building, Seminar Room

EAST AFRICA NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY
(Nature Kenya)
91st ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Monday 14 May 2001 at 5:30 pm at the Ford Hall, National Museum, Nairobi

This year, the AGM will feature presentations by all of Nature Kenya's Committees and Projects, describing their activities and accomplishments.
Come and see Nature Kenya in its many manifestations!

The Society belongs to you, the members. At the AGM, you elect an Executive Committee to manage Nature Kenya on your behalf. Members of the Executive are expected to attend meetings once a month and to put in volunteer time and expertise to help Nature Kenya to achieve its goals. If you have skills and time to contribute, or know someone who does, please nominate you/him/her/ as a member of the Executive Committee. A nomination form is enclosed.

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NATURALIST CORNER

VELVET ANTS

BY DINO MARTINS

It is a bright and starry night. A small, bright red and black insect with three white spots on its abdomen makes its way slowly across the floor of my house. A sand-coloured gecko greedily eyes it from a corner. The insect advances casually, even with impunity, oblivious to the danger ahead. The gecko inches forward, tail flicking rapidly, anticipating a meal. The gecko pounces. The insect turns and hisses loudly. The metallic hiss stops the gecko in its tracks. The gecko jumps back and scuttles away rapidly with a look of relief - it has narrowly escaped being stung by a female velvet ant.

Velvet ants, or more properly members of the Family Mutillidae, are part of the larger Order Hymenoptera - which encompasses ants, bees and wasps. While called velvet ants, they are actually thought to be closer to some of the more primitive wasps. The ant-like females, such as the one the gecko encountered, are flightless and armed with a particularly vicious venomous sting. Males, on the other hand, are winged, capable of flight and do not have a sting or any other direct defence mechanism. Various species are distributed throughout Kenya, from Nairobi shambas to coastal forests. The vicious sting and temperament of the female means that any predator foolish enough to tangle with her will never make the same mistake twice. Would-be predators soon learn to associate the simple, bold colour patterns and hissing sounds as clear signals of "DO NOT APPROACH!"

A few nights later, I spot the same gecko wiggling across the window ledge. This time he has set his sights on a weevil-like beetle gently grooming itself with its forelegs. The gecko inches forward, the beetle pauses, then turns and displays its white-spotted abdomen. The gecko is not convinced, he creeps closer. This is the last straw for the beetle, it hisses loudly and waves its spotted abdomen.

This is too much for the gecko. The loud hiss registers in the gecko-brain as "Velvet ant-DO NOT APPROACH!". The poor gecko turns and runs, - no dinner for him tonight. What he doesn't realise, is that he has been deceived. The beetle is indeed perfectly edible - it is simply a clever mimic of the female velvet ant.

Mimicry is an aspect of biology that we are most familiar with as a means of camouflage. Many diverse organisms are mimics of one kind or another:butterflies copy the pattern of dry leaves, stick insects mimic twigs, chameleons morph colour depending on their mood and surroundings. The mimics of velvet ants however, do not seek to hide from their predators, instead they choose to deceive them. They do this by cleverly copying the patterns and/or behaviour of the velvet ants. Most creatures that have tangled with a female velvet ant will never willingly repeat the error. The mimics capitalise on this negative-association imprinting. They can therefore, carry on foraging and seeking mates with the smoothness of an expert bluffer in a card game. They make the predators think they hold the ace. It's all about how well you can pull off the act - just another amazing way of surviving in nature.

COMMITTEE NEWS & PROFILES

BIRD COMMITTEE Binocular Fund

This Fund assists Kenyan Important Bird Areas bird guides to obtain good quality binoculars for their work. The Fund is open to full or part time bird guides **active in Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in Kenya. This offer does <u>not</u> apply to professional tour guides.**

Why has it been set up?

Many knowledgeable and enthusiastic people are acting as bird guides in Important Bird Areas such as Kakamega and the Arabuko-Sokoke Forests. The fund aims to help increase the ornithological skills of such guides, through making good quality binoculars available to them at affordable prices. It has been set up with sponsorship from staff of the British High Commission, Nairobi.

Who is eligible?

Applicants must: · be active as bird guides in one or more IBAs · have strong bird identification and other ornithological skills, at least in relation to their local areas · not already have a good quality pair of binoculars · provide one third of the total cost of the binoculars.

When an application is approved, binoculars will be sourced directly by the Bird Committee. This will be done as fast as possible but could take several months. Successful applicants must provide their share of the cost of the binoculars to the Treasurer of the Nature Kenya Bird Committee within four months of their application being approved – otherwise the offer will be cancelled.

Recommended binoculars are listed below: these may not always be available and prices may change. The maximum value of any pair purchased under this scheme is GBP 260.

Recommended binoculars: **Nikon Action series** 7 x 35 c. £90, 8 x 40 c. £110. Non-waterproof, porro-prism. Good bright picture, close focus. **Bushnell Natureview+** 8 x 42 c. £120, 10 x 42 c. £130. Non-waterproof, porro-prism. Well tested, good quality birding bins. **Swift Trilyte** 8 x 42 c. £145, 10 x 42 c. £165. Waterproof roof prism. Good optics, close focus (4m), reasonable field of view (6°), light (515 g). Lifetime warranty. Excellent value though not as robust as more expensive roof-prism binoculars. **Eschenbach** 8 x 42 c. £255. Waterproof roof prism. Compact, robust (a little heavy), nitrogen-filled, excellent optics. 10 year warranty.

How to apply?

Collect the application from the Nature Kenya front office or write to us at Box 44486, 00100 Nairobi.

REGULAR ACTIVITIES

POT LUCK OUTINGS

Members meet at the National Museum, Nairobi car park at 9:00 a.m. the third Sunday of every month, **i.e. 15 April**. They decide where to go and what to do - usually observing birds and nature in general. Bring lunch.

TREE WALK

Arboretum guided Tree Walks on the last Monday of every month i.e. **30 April from 9:30 a.m.** Meet at the FONA offices beside the Girl Guides HQ. *Those who are not members of FONA pay Ksh 100/- fee on arrival at the gate.*

WEDNESDAY MORNING BIRDWALKS

Bird watching walks at sites in and around Nairobi. Meet at the National Museum car park every Wednesday at 8:45 a.m. Return about 12:30 p.m. *Those who are not members can get temporary membership at Ksh 100 per birdwalk, payable on arrival at the car park.*

ARABUKO SOKOKE (COAST)

The Saturday birdwatch with the Arabuko Sokoke Forest Guides Association is on the first Saturday of each month i.e. **7 April**, at 6:30 a.m. from the Visitor Centre, Gede. Cost 100/- per person.

FFJ Bird Walk (Coast)

The Friends of Fort Jesus birdwalks are normally held the first or second Saturday of each month i.e. **7 April, at 4:30 p.m.** from Ratna Square

DECLARATION

Nature Kenya does not accept any responsibility whatsoever in respect of negligence of any of its staff, volunteers or members organising the outings/trips or for any for loss, injury, death or damage to property.

APRIL DIARY

Sat 7	AS & FFJ Birdwalks
Mon 9	High Hopes, Low Tides
Wed 11 - Thu 19	Usambara trip
Thu 12	Brink of extinction talk
Sun 15	Pot Luck Outing
Wed 25	Members Lunch
Sat 28	Plant Outing
Mon 30	Tree Walk
Birdwalks every Wednesday Morning	

Editor, **Catherine Ngarachu**

EXCURSIONS

PLANT OUTING Saturday 28 April '01

Outing to the Rift Valley Escarpment, exploring either the "Corner Baridi" to Kajiado Road or the Magadi Road, depending on weather conditions.

Meet at the National Museum, Nairobi, car park at 8:30 a.m.

MAY YOUTH TRIP!

WILLIAM HOLDEN EDUCATION CENTRE, NANYUKI

Friday 25 to Sunday 27 May '01 (Subject to confirmation)

The Centre is set at the foot of Mount Kenya and has good accommodation facilities including toilets and showers, kitchen, and tents .We will be visiting the animal orphanage and game ranch, where you will have the opportunity to see the Llama from Chile (South America), the endangered White Rhino, Zebroids and the elusive Bongos!

Accommodation is offered absolutely free! However, you will need to carry your own sleeping bags. You will also need to bring your own food for the trips' duration. Cooking facilities are available and group cooking can be organised. Remember to carry some extra cash for contingencies.

We have hired a van to take us, to and from the centre, which will cost Ksh 700/- per person. For those who have their own cars, lifts will be highly appreciated!

Book by 10 May '01 through the Secretary, YC or the Nature Kenya front office.

MEMBERS LUNCH

Topic - Environmental Impact Assessments, what role do they play? *with Anjali Saini*

Join this informal discussion group on **Wednesday 25 April,'01, 1:00 p.m.** and share with other members your thoughts on this topic. Bustani Cafeteria, National Museums of Kenya. Lunch 100/-

Anjali Saini works as an environmental consultant, and is happy to take your questions on this topic. If you have any specific requests, please email her on saini@iconnect.co.ke

NOTICE BOARD

WANTED! PHOTOGRAPHS OF KENYAN LANDSCAPES

An exciting project is being undertoken by Dovid Western ond Roy Turner, to document the ecologicol chonges in Kenyo over the lost 100 yeors using repeot photogrophy. The gool is to document the changes from the lowlonds to the highlonds, including protected oreas, by precisely locoting ond repeoting eorly photogrophs.

Currently they hove over 200 photogrophs from vorious regions ond ore hoping to collect mony more by appealing ta anyone wha can provide photos, 50 to 100 yeors old, of eosily locoted sites with defining londmorks.

They intend to produce o book of the repeoted photos ond on interpretotion of hobitot chonges. In oddition, motched photos will be mode ovoiloble to the public in the form of digitol imoges ot the Notionol Archives ond Museums.

If you hove suitable photos pleose contoct either Dovid Western ot dwestern@ofricoonline.co.ke or reseorch ossociote Sunito Sorkor ot sisters@iconnect.co.ke (or coll them ot 891751 or 891360).

Forest Excision Crisis, continued from page 1

A short form of the petition appeared as an ad on the front page of one of the daily newspapers on March 5, when KFWG held a press conference. The full KFWG press release also oppeored os on odvertisement the next doy. Donors from the business community, NGOs and individuals contributed to costs of communication and advertising.

Letters of objections were written for eoch proposed excision. Grounds for objections voried from forest to forest, but were bosed on the following:

1. Impact on water cotchment, including streom flow fluctuation, soil erosion, and loss of climate moderation
2. Impoct on water catchment for electricity production (especially South-Western Mou, upper cotchment of the Sondu River)
3. Impacts on agriculture, postoralism ond fisheries downstream
4. Social impact; settling squotters on forest land does not solve the problem of londlessness
5. Impact on timber production
6. Impoct on forest products such as medicinol plonts
7. Impact on conservation of biodiversity
8. Impoct on tourism, current and potential
9. Conflict with national policy, such as the Forest Policy ond Nationol Environment Action Plon, ond directives by the Heod of Stote to protect forests on water cotchments
10. Conflict with obligations under international ogreements such as the Africon Convention on the Conservotion of Noture ond Notural Resources, the Convention on Biological Diversity, ond the United Nations Fromework Convention on Climote Chonge.
11. Conflict with the Forest Act, since in mony coses settlement hod taken place prior to legal excision.
12. Conflict with the new Environment Monogement and Co-Ordinotion Act where applicoble.

Kenya Forests Working Group decided to woit for officiol reoction to the petitions and letters of objections before toking further oction. Meanwhile, the Porliomentory Committee on Agriculture, Land and Natural Resources has discussed the forest issue with the Minister for Environment ond Minister for Lands and Settlement ond continues investigotions. Other environmental groups hove held meetings to discuss the way forward, ond some have decided to toke legol oction.

At the time *Nature Net* went to press, two groups hod olreody gone to court. One group. from the Ogiek community, sued to stop the excision of 35,000 hectores in Eostern Mau forest in Nokuru. In Eldoret, environmentol lawyer Nixon Sifuno sued agoinst oll of the forest excisions proposed in the Gazette of 16 Februory.

Ironically, on 16 Morch, the Minister for Environment lounched the Notional Environment Council, composed of o dozen Permanent Secretories and nine representotives from the privote sector. This top policy-making body, choired by the Minister, is the first part of the Environment Monogement ond Co-Ordination Act, 1999, to be made operotionol.

Fleur Ng'weno

YOUTH COMMITTEE

Profile

The Youth Committee (YC) is one of the newer committees of Noture Kenya. It largely owes its existence to a youth workshop, orgonised by Noture Kenyo, ot Egerton University on 1 April 2000.

The YC aspires to promote conservation oworeness and education omong youth members; initiate and stimulate group conservotion octivities; organise youth outdoor activities such as camping trips and field excursions; organise youth get-togethers; focilitote youth exchange programmes and networking; disseminote information regording the youth ond the environment.

The YC hos olreody mode tongible impocts locolly and internotionolly! Recently the YC organised a group octivity at Egerton University to celebrote the 'World Wetlands Day' on 2 Februory '01. The YC members in Noirobi did o one-hour live presentotion on the importonce of wetlonds, in Swohili, on the same day, at the popular radio station 'Kameme FM'. A member of the YC represented Kenyo in an internotional youth workshop in Netherlands between the 14 - 18 Januory 2001 under the auspices of the International Associotion of Volunteer Effort (IAVE). The YC wos olso represented in a 10-doy 'UNEP Globol Youth Retreot' in Momboso.

To get a better idea of your interest in youth octivities, we invite you to send us the following detoils:

1. Your name/ Age/ Occupation/ Contacts/ Membership Number and type (Full/Student).
2. o) What are your interests? b) What activities/ programmes would you like to see the YC engoged in?
3. Any other views, comments, suggestions etc?

Send this to the Secretory, Youth Committee, ot the Nature Kenyo office - Thonk you!

★★★★★

News

In July 1999 Nature Kenya held a seminar and warkshap ta raise awareness af the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA), highlighting the impartance af its ratificatian. Subsequently a Cabinet memarandum an the agreement was prepared and appraved.

On the 9 March 2001Kenya depasited its instruments af accessian ta AEWA. By daing this Kenya will became the 30th Party ta the Agreement on the Conservatian af African-Eurasian Migratary Waterbirds (AEWA) as of 1 July 2001. Hapefully mare cauntries will jain saan taa.